

Magazine Feature Section

THROWING THE ENEMY OFF THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

THIS is the story of Giovanni Bocca as it is being told in Padua, where Italian troops are gathering from the footpaths of the Tyrolean Alps, from which the Austrians are slowly beating back these hardy mountain soldiers.

From Innsbruck, the capital of the most southerly province of Austria, there runs southward and to the east of Lake Garda, the great Brenner Pass, connecting the Italian city of Verona. Foot by foot at the beginning of the war, the Italians advanced across the border for several miles as the crow flies—but for many, many miles, if the twisting paths through the mountains are measured.

Along the east of the Brenner Pass the Central Tyrolean Alps rise in jagged peaks so abruptly a man all but hangs in space as he climbs, only to find sheer precipices on the opposite side when the summit is reached. The altitude varies from 8000 to 12,000 feet above sea level.

There are the scenes of more than a score of times of the fiercest fighting in history, owing to its position astride the Alps, and so commanding the road across them. It is the roof of the world, and a victory on the small plateau, where opposing handfuls of soldiers occasionally meet in hand-to-hand conflicts, means that the bones of the defeated bleed where they fall, or

marksmanship and their climbing, could not get through. Their only hope would be to scale the mountain side to the Italian position in a surprise attack from the Austrian side, or to gain a commanding position on the peak that reared above the Italians across the path.

An attack on the Italian position up the Austrian side of their mountain was closely guarded night and day. Through the pass below the Italian troops constantly poured, back and forth, hunting their enemy through the maze of footpaths that lead from every angle. Further on the pass was held by the Austrians in a position as impregnable as that of the Italians seemed.

Across the pass on the opposite mountain peak within rifle shot was a plateau, across which ran breastworks of solid stone. Behind that it would be an easy matter for the enemy to dislodge the commanding guns of the Italians, should the Austrians ever succeed in getting on the top. Clashes along the mountain sides were of daily occurrence, but only one attempt was made by the Austrians to rush the main pass. In that attempt they discovered with heavy loss the position of the Italian machine guns above.

The Italians in vain endeavored to gain the plateau of the opposite peak, and in the midst of repeated failures word was brought by scouts that a company of Austrians had succeeded in gaining a level half way between the pass and the plateau, but around on the Austrian side, away from the higher guns of the Italians.

are thrown off the globe. Quarter is seldom given, for it usually is an individual warfare, each man for himself.

In retreating, each man's life depends upon the sureness of his toes and the grip of his fingers. His rifle is strapped to his back. It would be difficult in the extreme to guard a prisoner in descending to a camp if one should be captured among the glaciers and slippery toe-holds of the snow-capped mountains.

But Giovanni Bocca captured fifty and they were brought down the mountains to Padua.

The story has drifted to Venice, Bocca's home, by those who, at this writing, fear that Padua will be unable to withstand the threatened onslaught of the invading Austrians.

Going back to Roman history, the passes through these mountains have been few, and with the exception of some of the larger ones, are known only by the natives. The Romans knew of two, the Splügen and Septimer, but were guided through these. But back from the old tourist trails there is a network of paths that lead to more than one artery that runs from one side of the range to the other. It has been comparatively easy for either side to block the known passes with artillery. It has been a different matter with the network of paths, for that has required the climbing of peaks, the transportation of machine guns and howitzers up the thousands of feet of perpendicular mountain walls.

Once in position, this artillery has easily commanded as high as a dozen footpaths, one of which, perhaps, would connect another network, the whole making an outlet to the other side. There would be held for weeks and months an entire section of range until the enemy, avoiding the beaten paths, would climb the hitherto defiant mountain sides, and, in a surprise attack, command instead of being commanded.

It was one of these commanding sites that the Italians recently were situated upon. Below was the pass. To the east as far as the eye could see was an impassable range. Across the path below rose the sides of a 100-foot slab of upended rock, snow and ice. As far as the eye could see across the pass, there was no other way of crossing the range until another smaller path between the hills was reached, and there the Italians commanded.

The Austrian Tyroleans, famous for their

The Italians found the footholds leading to the Austrians' position, and tried in a night climb to surprise them, but were repulsed. Word was sent to the base in the valley for an aeroplane, minute directions being given for the purpose of bomb-dropping.

Then the aviator explained his plan.

"The plateau that overlooks the pass," he said, "runs level for 50 yards. It is open on



"Giovanni quickly cut the rope."

three sides—the side next to the pass and on either end. Back, however, there is a ridge of stone. My plan would be to try to alight at the edge of the plateau and let the machine gun run the 50 yards into the ridge, where it would be wrecked, but where myself and passenger would stop, possibly dead—but that is a chance we would have to take.

"We could take rope enough to bring up

men from the Italian side of the mountain. We could carry enough rifles and ammunition to hold off the Austrians. If they should succeed in climbing up from their present position."

The aviator was interrupted by the appearance of a messenger.

The messenger reported that the Italian scouts in the mountains had seen the Austrians

position, but that it was beyond rifle range, and that it was impossible to get artillery in a position to fire upon them. The scouts had seen enough to convince them that the Austrians were attempting to gain the farther side of the plateau so that they could climb up behind the natural breastworks, and that the enemy was busily engaged in driving spikes in the walls of rock for footholds, but that it would require another day's work before they could gain the top.

"Oh, captain, let me try the climb from our side," Giovanni pleaded.

"It cannot be done, my boy," the officer replied, kindly, "but if you are so eager to get into the mountains, I'll see what I can do."

Toward the early morning hours the captain awoke the aviator who had proposed the wrecking of the machine to get command of the dreaded plateau. The ridge that ran across its face stopped abruptly at one edge around which a man could walk.

"Could one man pick them off as fast as they could climb up?" he asked the aviator.

"I am sure of it, captain," the aviator replied.

"There is but one place in which to gain the top, and they will have to spike the wall all of the way up. They will not be looking for interference and will be slow."

"I have decided," the captain said, evenly, "to try an unheard-of feat. I believe it will succeed and will not be as dangerous as the plan you proposed."



GIOVANNI BOCCA

"It is needless to say that Giovanni will gladly risk his life for the attempt. He will die happy, at least."

"I have given orders for a machine gun to be packed, also a box of ammunition, a rifle and rope. This will be suspended from your machine and we will have Giovanni on it. I want you to circle above the plateau and turn at the proper moment to allow Giovanni to drop upon the top. He will cut the rope and land all together, if that is possible. If he succeeds in landing, but does not succeed in severing the rope in time, you will have to return and throw enough rope to him. He will then use the rope to get up a rifle and possibly more men. We can climb within 200 feet of the plateau, and there will be 400 feet of rope."

Giovanni was ready at daybreak for the start. The problem of suspending the heavy weight from the aeroplane was solved without accident.

On the left of the aviator was the coil of rope. On the right wing sat Giovanni, nursing a heavily padded gun, box and rifle. As the machine arose, Giovanni lowered the gun and ammunition overboard slowly until it hung 20 feet below, then, as instructed by the captain, he leaned over, grasped the rope as the landscape raced backward beneath him, and quickly was on the small, strong cord below the aeroplane. Down he slid until his feet rested on the big bundle.

In order to keep from spinning around in mid-air as the machine climbed higher and ever higher, Giovanni had attached to one tip of the aeroplane wing a small cord which he held fast.

Soon the peak appeared beneath him, then began a long circling descent toward them. He saw the pass, recognized the position held by the Italians and studied carefully the opposite plateau upon which he was to land. The captain had instructed him to keep knife ready to cut the rope and drop just as the machine turned in the center above the mountain floor. If the aviator misjudged the distance, he had been warned not to drop, but await a second circle. He was to use his own judgment, and the aviator had been instructed to circle above the plateau again and again until the attempt succeeded.

Giovanni realized that if the machine descended too low before approaching the mountain top, he would be dashed to death against the side. It was the biggest risk of all. He decided he would rather take the chance of a long drop.

The machine flew over the plateau, too high and too fast for the suspended man to drop off. Then the aeroplane turned back through the pass, with Giovanni lower than the level of the peak, but in a circling flight that tended upward, so that as it neared the edge of the peak it turned again outward from it. The right height had been reached. Giovanni could almost step off on to the plateau as the machine whirled away for a figure 8, one end of which Giovanni could see would quickly place him in the center of the mountain floor. The bundle beneath his feet almost scraped the edge of the precipice as the machine darted over, then turned.

Giovanni saw his chance. He was being jerked rapidly toward the edge and back into space when he slashed through the rope that held him to the machine. Over and over he rolled with the bundle of gun and ammunition after him until his body struck against the barrier of rock that crossed the plateau.

Slowly Giovanni lifted his head, then one arm and leg after the other. He sat up, half stunned, half wondering if he was falling through the air and half wondering if he was still riding suspended beneath the machine.

Time was not to be lost, however, and Giovanni quickly unpacked the gun, loaded the disc of shells and examined his rifle to see that it was in good order after the tumble it had received. The rifle was not injured.

Giovanni shouldered it and went to explore the opposite side of the plateau behind the ridge. He found an Austrian sentry smaller than his own landing place. Cautiously he glanced over the edge. The Austrians had worked throughout the night and were near the top. They would have to approach the top one at a time, with their rifles strapped to their backs. They were unaware of what was waiting for them, and Giovanni smiled.

Stepping back he waited. Another spike was driven home below. Giovanni was doing some fast thinking. If the first man saw him he would shout a warning to those below. The first man would be sure to withdraw as soon as he stuck his head above the edge. The men probably were climbing without ropes, as most of the soldiers do in the Alps.

So Giovanni stood with rifle ready for the appearance of the first Austrian. First he saw an ungloved hand reach up from below and grasp the rock. Then an arm and the head and shoulders. Giovanni fired. There was a piercing yell. The Austrian swung high his hands and toppled backward.

All afternoon Giovanni lay at the edge of the mountain top, looking down upon the Austrians' position. Once a soldier appeared and Giovanni fired. The soldier fell off the roof of the world, dead before his feet left the precipice.

As the sun was setting Giovanni saw his comrades appear from below.

Two went along the path that led back of the ledge where he knew the Austrians must be lying in wait. Soon he saw the men return and report. Then they returned and soon were carrying rifles. These were handed to the Italian soldiers below. Then the two Italian soldiers climbed up toward Giovanni a few feet, each holding to the spikes with one hand and a revolver in the other. Soon the Austrians appeared and descended. Giovanni was ordered to lower the machine gun on the rope and to descend. This was soon accomplished. There were fifty prisoners taken from the Austrian ledge.